

NEW EPOCH

TETHYS: HUNTERS OF THE FREEHOLD

BY GARY ASTLEFORD

Tethyn culture originated in what is now Spain. Had the people of this provincial and wooded land been more willing to cooperate with one another in the early days, Tethys might have rivaled Atlantis as a great nation of the mythic age. It was the first civilization of man to maintain a semi-feudal society, but more importantly, it developed without the influence of fae, dragons, titans, or any other of the older races whose existences or practices shaped the kingdoms of man. Their pride and racial unity allowed them to resist such inroads from other races, even subconscious ones, and so they clung to the cultural facets they had developed on their own. Some suggest that this independence led to the continuance of Tethyn language beyond the mythic age and into the modern, resulting in an island of linguistic independence in the Pyrenees of Europe.

However, this same pride forbade them from bowing to Atlantis during its expansionist period; instead they attempted to make war on this more magically and navally savvy power. And so their strong compounds were burnt and an entire generation of hunters was slain . . . as a result of this foolhardy war in which all Tethyns fought but few Tethyns cooperated, the culture was nearly wiped out. This was midway through the fourth millennium of the Fourth Sun of the mythic age, over 3,000 years since the culture began. In their disorganized and still-poor state, the hunters and subsistence farmers who were the Tethyns' descendants were easily enslaved or pushed out of their territory, like so many others, by the migrating Kurgans. At the mythic age's cataclysmic end, the only Tethyn descendants scraped a living in the poor soil of their old homelands'

forbidding mountain peaks or lived off of what they could fish and scavenge on the southern shores of the Inner Sea.

GEOGRAPHY

Tethys is a rugged land of heavily-forested hills, mountains, and valleys that are occasionally punctuated by long tracts of fog-shrouded moor. The first freeholds

were founded around 1,000th year of the Fourth Sun, centuries before civilization began on Atlantis; at their height, before Atlantis's navy was built and with the concept of "empire" still 1,000 years away, the freeholds extended from the Weeping Deep (the chasm at the westernmost joining of Erebea and Ofir, which would one day be the Strait of Gibraltar) in southwestern Erebea, north as far as what would become southern Avalon, and east into the Elysian Plain.

An offshoot of the Tethyn clans also settled on Illean, the island in the Inner Sea that lies just to the east of the southwestern spur of Erebea. Illean is less forested than the Tethyn mainland, with regions of gently rolling fen intermixed with grassland. Much of Tethys's arable ground is found upon this dismal



isle. Though the clans that call Illean their home will never want for bread, they are seen in an unflattering light by their mainland cousins, who refer to them disparagingly as "farmers." Crops grown in Illean are limited to wheat, barley, and several kinds of root vegetables, but they were not assisted by any beasts of burden, having domesticated none, nor by metal tools, having neither ore nor the knowledge of how to work it. This,

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combined with the Tethys occasionally demanding young men and women as prey for the *Gorynne Kazicka*, or “most dangerous hunt,” kept Illean mortality high and prevented them from developing as an agricultural society normally would.

The sea off the coast of western Tethys is called the Weeping Deep, for it is constantly covered with fog and rain. Storms occasionally blow across the Deep, soaking the mainland and casting a gloomy light upon the entire kingdom. The weather in western Tethys is often cloudy, and rain is a constant concern. As one travels northeastward into Erebea, the weather improves, growing warmer and less damp, eventually reaching the Elysian Plains. The plains are home to nothing more than rodents and slow, dull-witted ruminants, early predecessors of cattle; the Tethys have no interest in such creatures whatsoever, as they are easy to sneak up on and kill, but impossible to hunt once in a stampeding mass (the Tethys do not have horses; these will remain alien to Erebea until the Kurgans bring them). Additionally, the Tethys have an extreme dislike and fear of the wooded land that stretches both north and east of the Elysian Plains, which is either the border of Elysium or the separate reaches of Avalon and Arcadia. Either way, of the Tethys hunting parties that braved the plains, surviving the large aerial predators that preyed upon the ruminants and making the several-weeks trek to the forest at its far edge, only those who refused to enter the woods came back. All others simply disappeared in the green, never to return.

HISTORY

The history of the Tethys is like that of countless hunter-gatherer societies throughout time: fluid, uncertain, and unrecorded. The unifying principles of the Tethys hunt and its societal rules started from a seed of a few proud hunting villages, grew into a society of freeholds spanning hundreds of miles, and then simply hit a plateau . . . in essence, the culture grew to its borders, then became static, its populations rising and falling with the populations of the game creatures within hunting reach. The savage nature of the beasts in the Tethys woodlands,

along with disease, starvation, accidents, and the ravages of weather, kept the Tethys from overpopulating. But as for notable historical figures or important events? Every Tethys hunter would claim that his greatest hunt is known throughout the land, and every freehold has its own ancestral heroes of which stories are told throughout the years, the tales growing in size, scope, and non-believability with each passing generation.

CULTURE & GOVERNANCE

Foremost among the driving forces of Tethys culture is the hunt. Their traditional homeland is known for its mystical fecundity, which allows them to live on what would otherwise be an over-hunted population of game animals. Scores of competing lords, known as the

Eiztaria or “Masters of the Hunt” rival one another for dominance of hunting grounds and arable land, but such competition always takes the form of a hunt rather than a battle. While more aggressive peoples were decimating themselves with competitive warfare and raiding, the Tethys’ form of intercultural competition led only to more food for the people as a whole. Perhaps the key practice of this tradition is that neither a hunter nor his family could partake of the food, furs, skins, or other products of an animal he had hunted; rather, such benefits must always be given to the next lowest hunter of the freehold’s hierarchy. This practice creates an interdependent web of favors, obligations, and honor bindings, and assures that those in the positions of highest power, the *Eiztaria*, are dependent

upon the gifts of their freeholders for the basic needs to survive.

All of the Tethys that live within or near a freehold are called its freefolk. Each freehold is administered by a Master of the Hunt, who is elevated to that position by dint of the type and quantity of beasts he has successfully hunted. The Master of the Hunt is served in turn by a group of lieutenants, known simply as Freehunters. Each freehunter is given various responsibilities within



their freehold, ranging from the care of its beasts to the manufacture of its weapons, tack, and armor. The freehold's falconer, known as the Master of the Sky, sees to the welfare of the freehunters' birds of prey, while the Master of Hounds is responsible for the care of the freehunters' hunting dogs. The maintenance and manufacture of weapons is overseen by the Master of Arms. To become a Master of the Hunt, an aspiring Tethyn must first master the jobs of each of the freehunters. This system allows for women to raise to as high a rank as they like, but no special consideration is provided for those who are on the verge of bearing children or those who wish to nurse and educate their children personally. Most female freehunters and Masters of the Hunt choose therefore not to bear children. Because the position of Master of the Hunt changes every few years, and since the position is not hereditary, there is little cultural drive to produce children to continue one's legacy. This is not to say that the biological drive to produce children is not extant, however; because of the common wounds and accidents that a hunter of beasts may suffer, as well as the inevitable aging of the most able-bodied hunters, children are reared in a communal style. They may look to those who are unable to hunt for mentorship, or may spend time with their true parents on easier hunts, or may latch onto a freehunter from another freehold who is visiting. In the end, it is a hunter's individual accomplishments that make his name into legend, not that of his parents' or his childrens'.

Nearly every task in the Tethyn paradigm is compared to a hunt of some sort. Courtship, success in business, and warfare are all analogous to hunting to the average Tethyn. Traps are never, as a matter of honor, used among the Tethyns, even if the hunter in question is somehow prevented from tracking and killing the great beasts. Any who trap for their meat are subject to scorn and are banished if they are found out. The old or lame of the Tethyns will instead wait in the brush for hours on end, patient and unmoving, in order to catch passing small game with a well-aimed stone throw or a quick grab of the hands. Obviously, therefore, most of the Tethyn diet consists of meat.

Vast tracts of dense forest, treacherous marsh, and rugged hills, replete with ample water from springs and rivers, surround each freehold. A freehold may claim anywhere from 10 miles around it to hundreds of miles as its hunting ground; if a new freehold crops up within those lands or an existing one attempts to extend its boundaries, a great hunt or *gyrigut* is called. Hundreds of gyrigut variations exist, each with differing durations, weapons allowed, number of hunters in a party (ranging from solo to hundreds of men), area that may be hunted, prey beasts, and countless other minutiae ranging from the songs that must be sung on the way back from the hunt to the types of images that may be carved in the bones of the taken animals; a hunter's adherence to and success in any and all of these details may be the deciding factor, or part of the deciding factor, as to who "wins" the hunt.

Freeholds are built from wood, stone, sod, and the bones and flesh of great beasts. These last are the most sacred of materials, and prepared through a part-alchemical, part-natural process that strengthens the bones to that of the sturdiest timbers while keeping them light. Those who hunted the beast from which the bones came are responsible for carving them into the appropriate imagery of the hunt or of Tethyn ancestor-heroes (who are universally shared by all throughout the culture). The skins are likewise prepared in a variety of manners, formed into everything from a sturdy and durable wall sheeting, to transparent skins that are placed in windows, to incredibly flexible yet resilient leather hunting armor. As a universal rule, the hunter must prepare his kill and all of its remains. It is these remains, both as trophies and as useful equipment, that speak to a hunter's prowess, and if he cannot point to the result of his hunts as proof of his boasting, he might as well not open his mouth.

Those Tethyns who are not fit to join in the hunts of the faster or larger beasts are relegated to raising children, maintaining the household, gathering tubers, berries, and other edible vegetation, or hunting small game. There is no shame if a hunter is unable to maintain his position due to age or injury; it is not what one *can* hunt down but rather what one *has hunted* in his time or *could hunt* in the time left to him that matter. So long as an aging hunter can point to a pillar of bone that he left his mark upon, or to a window of clearskin that he stretched himself, he is cared for to the best of the freehold's ability. With their limited medical ability and meat-heavy diet, however (possibly thankfully), those old who fall ill or become unable to eat of the meat of the hunt tend not to last long.

Small treated bone monuments, carved to resemble animals and legendary beasts, are used to mark roads and pathways in the wilds of Tethys, many of which are little more than game trails widened over the centuries. Not only do these markers identify where a road or path begins and ends, they also signify which freehold claims the hunting rights over the surrounding wilderness. It is a great affront to any hunter to find a stranger hunting without permission on his ancestral lands. In Tethys, poaching game is a crime punishable by death. The farther one retreats from freehold, the less obvious the roads and pathways become. It is not difficult for strangers to become lost in the Tethyn wilderness, and even if they remain on the game trails the dangerous beasts with which Tethyn hunters make their names far prefer the cleared trails to the dense brush. Terrible creatures make their lairs in the deep dells and high hills between freeholds, and men looking for fame and fortune have ventured into the wilds, never to return.

**STAY TUNED IN TWO WEEKS
FOR THE REST OF TETHYS:
HUNTERS OF THE FREEHOLD**